

North Minneapolis farmer hopes to see mushrooms at more dinner tables

Written by Shaina Brassard and Erin Jerabek, West Broadway Business and Area Coalition
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Continuing our look into access to healthy foods and those working to improve quality of life in North Minneapolis, we sat down with popular West Broadway Farmers Market vendor and Northside native, Ian Silver-Ramp, owner of Mississippi Mushrooms.

Mississippi Mushrooms is an urban agricultural business specializing in the production of delicious and hard-to-find gourmet mushrooms. Since June, Silver-Ramp has been producing King Oyster and other varieties of 100-percent safe to eat mushrooms. As shown on his website, www.mississippimushrooms.com, the fungi are grown in a sterile, temperature-controlled space using pressure-sterilized sawdust, coffee grounds and spent brewer's grain food waste that would otherwise be thrown out.

As the name of his business suggests, Mississippi Mushrooms is about as local as you can get. Not only are the mushrooms grown mere blocks from the farmers market where Silver-Ramp sells his wares every Friday; the substrate, or what the mushrooms feed on, comes from spent brewers grain from Boom Island Brewing on North 2nd Street and coffee grounds from West Broadway's Avenue Eatery. Silver-Ramp then sends his mushrooms back into the community at the West Broadway Farmers Market and at Local D'Lish, a neighborhood, local foods grocery store located at 208 N 1st Street.

Silver-Ramp, who studied agriculture at the University of Minnesota after graduating from North Minneapolis' Patrick Henry High School, will talk a person's ear off about the wonders of

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mushrooms. He'll tell how mushrooms and other fungi are an essential component in the cycle of life and death, that mushrooms are known to have medicinal properties and produce a significant amount of protein.

But the real root of Silver-Ramp's excitement about mushrooms is the possibility of the no-environmental impact, local, urban, and year round production of a highly nutritious food.

"Mushrooms are kind of unique because, you can't raise corn or soybeans in the city," said Silver-Ramp. Compared to hydroponic farming, which is energy-intensive because it requires lighting, Mississippi Mushrooms' energy use is low.

Right now the King Oyster mushrooms for sale in the Twin Cities – and most of the nation – come from Oregon or China. Silver-Ramp says the mushrooms he grows have the same taste as the \$20 a pound Oregonian King Oysters available at The Wedge Co-op, but his are fresher, not dried-out, and at \$10 per pound, literally half the price. Talk about a market opportunity.

Though after only three months, Silver-Ramp is still perfecting production details. He has calculated that with 150 square feet of space, he should ultimately produce 100 pounds of mushrooms a week. Once he's got production levels up, he's interested in expanding operations for a couple reasons. One, he wants his business to be profitable. "But also, it's about food security," said Silver-Ramp. "If I'm able to produce more mushrooms more efficiently, I'd like to drop the price per pound significantly." That would translate into fresh, nutritious food that hasn't arrived from hundreds of miles away via gasoline-consuming trucks or planes, which means both the customer and the environment save.

"When production gets up, I would like to bring people on, hopefully this winter," said Silver-Ramp. "I think if this works, it's going to get a lot bigger than me. I'd like to see it be a cooperative enterprise, where the workers own part of the business."

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What kinds of people buy these unique mushrooms?

"Everyone does. I think people that are a little more adventurous with their food, but I haven't pinned it to any demographic group," said the mushroom grower. "People see them and say, 'I want to try that,' and some people come back for seconds."

Silver-Ramp does note that people will need to expand their ideas of what mushrooms are as a category.

"I had a customer that wanted a shitake mushroom, which has a really strong taste, but the King Oysters don't. I think mushrooms should really be thought of more like vegetables, with as many different types and flavors as vegetables, and you should use them for different things."

According to Silver-Ramp, when King Oyster mushrooms are cooked, they have a pleasant, mild flavor and almost meaty texture. "I think when people know how to cook these mushrooms, they're really going to like them," said Silver-Ramp who has a delicious recipe for grilled or baked King Oyster mushrooms on his website. He will be doing a cooking demonstration at the West Broadway Farmers Market on Sept. 14.

Silver-Ramp is proud of his new logo and business cards, which he got through the business class he took through the Neighborhood Development Center and the Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON).

"One of the best things I've done for the business is take (NEON's) class. There are so many great resources out there in North," said the North Minneapolis farmer. The class also offered Silver-Ramp the opportunity to meet the owners of Local D'Lish, a store that sells his mushrooms.

The West Broadway Farmers Market (WBFM), a project of the West Broadway Coalition, has

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also proved an important resource for Mississippi Mushrooms. Like all market vendors, Silver-Ramp does not pay a fee to sell at the market, and because the WBFM accepts EBT and participates in the Market Bucks incentive program, his customers can pay with EBT and WIC coupons. He also accepts Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons, cash and credit cards.

Alicia Uzarek, the market manager, connected Silver-Ramp to Minnesota Grown, which gave him a matching grant for market signage. Uzarek also helped him apply for a Northside Fresh Vendor stipend, which provided him and five other Northside-residing market vendors with \$500 in start-up assistance for insurance and market-related expenses.